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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BOUTROS HARB URGES INDEPENDENT LIST, EVEN
ABSENT OFFICIAL PRESIDENTIAL BACKING

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) March 14 MP Boutros Harb, on the eve of the U.S. presidential elections, expressed hope that the "Lebanese message" would be well-understood by the new U.S. administration. During his November 4 meeting with the Ambassador, Harb said March 14 had agreed to reach a unified position on candidates for the spring parliamentary elections. The coalition will continue to oppose expansion of National Dialogue participation and lowering of the voting age. Harb asked for U.S. assistance urging parties, including Michel Murr, LBC head Pierre Daher, and Armenian Tashnaq party, to cooperate with March 14's democratic goals. He believes President Sleiman will avoid publicly supporting an independent electoral list but Harb is working to encourage the President to offer "vocal" private support for independent candidates. Harb believed Sleiman would not be able to refuse any Iranian offer of military aid during his November 24-25 trip to Iran. He expressed concern that Walid Jumblatt may ask the new U.S. administration to work with Hizballah. The Ambassador reiterated continued U.S. support for Lebanon regardless of U.S. election results and supported U.S. and March 14 collaboration ahead of Lebanon's spring parliamentary elections. End Summary.

MARCH 14 VICTORY THROUGH COOPERATION

12. (C) Harb assessed the March 14 coalition will win a majority in the 2009 parliamentary elections, if its members work together in the coming months. During their November 3 coalition meeting, members agreed on the need for a unified strategy and to name a common list of candidates. They agreed to support postponing until 2013 parliamentary elections discussion of amending the voting age or inclusion of out-of-country voting; they also decided to oppose, during the November 5 National Dialogue session, expanding the list of National Dialogue participants.

13. (C) According to Harb, March 14 and the Future Movement "mishandled" the election for the Tripoli Bar Association -- in which their candidate lost to the March 8 candidate -- and should avoid similar missteps in the run-up to the election. However, Harb argued the results of the bar association vote do not foreshadow election results in the north, where he

said March 14 has 70 percent of the vote.

¶4. (C) Harb is encouraging Hariri to hold more frequent March 14 Secretariat meetings to show the Lebanese people the group is gathering and discussing ideas, an important optic into the democracy of the group's operation and its contrast to Shia Hizballah and Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). Regarding March 14 SYG Fares Souaid, Harb said Souaid was doing a good job but questioned if his mindset -- knowing he would lose election in Jbeil -- was appropriate for his role organizing and motivating March 14.

¶5. (C) Additionally, Harb stressed the importance of the media in the upcoming elections. March 8, with Aoun's "Orange TV," has an advantage over March 14 because, according to Harb, no Christians watch broadcasts by Hariri's Future television. He described March 14 efforts to sway Lebanese Broadcasting Channel (LBC) -- previously neutral but recently opposition-slanted -- back to an unbiased reporting line as unsuccessful, despite personal outreach by March 14 members. Harb called Lebanese Forces and March 14 leader Samir Geagea's attempt to repossess LBC a "big mistake." Working with LBC would be better than opening a new television station, Harb thought, since a new station would require more time and resources than are available to March 14. (Note: The Lebanese Forces controlled LBC from 1985 until Geagea was arrested in 1994 for crimes committed during the civil war. At that time, ownership transferred to co-founder Pierre Daher. Geagea in 2007 filed a lawsuit, still pending, to restore ownership of the channel to the LF. Furthermore,

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LBC's largest shareholder is Walid bin Talal. Saad Hariri and bin Talal have an extremely acrimonious relationship, which explains LBC's sometimes anti-March 14 editorial bent. End Note.)

SLEIMAN: "NO GUTS" FOR INDEPENDENT LIST...

¶6. (C) Harb saw little likelihood that President Sleiman would offer anything more than "behind the scenes" support for an independent Christian list. Although Sleiman wants an independent bloc in parliament, as it would give him more political room to maneuver, he does not want to help create or put his name on such a bloc. Harb said the independent list would have the cover of the President, but not officially. He is encouraging Sleiman to push March 14's Mansur Ilbon and Neemat Frem to run against Aoun in Kasrawan, since the two are unlikely to participate in the elections without insistence from the President. Michel Murr, who ideologically should be closer to Sleiman than Aoun, according to Harb, might consider running as an independent if he faced political pressure, including from the U.S. Harb also mentioned the Frem family's extensive interests in the U.S. as a means to encourage electoral allegiances. He noted Armenian Tashnaq Party participation on an independent list would help March 14.

¶7. (C) Harb agreed with the Ambassador that discussions of an independent list are making Aoun nervous. Harb described Aoun's supporters as unwilling to see Aoun's mistakes or scrutinize the dramatic changes in his positions since 2005. A new Christian choice, unaligned with Aoun or Geagea, is necessary and needs to be encouraged. Separately, Aoun and Michel Murr should give Sleiman a Christian seat in Jbeil, Sleiman's home district.

...AND WILL MOVE SLOWLY ON DIALOGUE

¶8. (C) Sleiman, according to Harb, is content with slow-moving National Dialogue discussion and will not risk failure by pushing agreements on disputed issues. Harb told the Ambassador that Aoun during the November 5 meeting will

propose putting Hizballah under "moral control" of the LAF without ceding any decision-making authority to the army command. Aoun's proposal, unpalatable to March 14, and expected disagreements regarding meeting participation, probably will force the postponement of discussions until after spring parliamentary elections.

"CAN'T TURN DOWN GIFTS"

¶9. (C) Harb assessed the Iranians will likely offer President Sleiman military aid during his November 24 and 25 visit to Tehran. Harb described the U.S. as Lebanon's "biggest friend" but said Sleiman would be unable to refuse a "gift" from the Iranians, even if it would be used as a political tool. Harb also said Sleiman would avoid confrontation with Syria during his term unless an exceptional bilateral issue arose.

CONCERN FOR JUMBLATT'S MESSAGE IN WASHINGTON

¶10. (C) Harb also expressed concern that Druze leader Jumblatt will stray from the March 14 line during his upcoming trip to Washington. Jumblatt will be the first March 14 leader to meet the transition team and Harb fears Jumblatt may ask the new U.S. administration to work with Hizballah in order to avoid conflict in Lebanon.

SISON